

# locks or exam shoes

## do dancers need them?

by Esther Juon

4. Spring the metatarsal heads off the floor, leaving all of the five toes extended.

POINTING THE FOOT IN THIS WAY WILL STOP THE CURLING OF YOUR TOES.

### Why are these arches so important?

The arches are responsible for the “spring in your step”. The bones in the foot are supported by a complicated network of muscles and tendons. The strength of these muscles is crucial in pointe work. The bones in the foot do not finish hardening and growing until around the age of 21. Therefore the bones can be deformed when put on pointe. The only way to protect the bones is to have very strong muscles in the feet and good strong placement of the body. Without them, pointe work will be very painful and can cause you injury.

### How can I strengthen these muscles?

With the metatarsal lift exercise:

You should sit on a low stool, or kneel on the floor. Place the working foot in parallel, using the 3 points of support discussed earlier. Hold the toes to the floor with your fingers and try to lift the transverse arch. Make sure you lift it evenly or you run the risk of only strengthening one part of the arch.

Hold the position for 2 seconds and release.

Repeat 9 times more and then try the other foot.

Do the exercise every day and increase the number of lifts gradually over the weeks to 100 lifts a day. Never do more than 20 lifts per foot at one time. Change the foot after every 20 lifts.

### How will a demi-pointe shoe strengthen my ankles, feet and calf muscles?

#### The tightly fitting shoe:

A demi-pointe shoe will be fitted as tightly as a pointe shoe. The foot has to get used to working in a much more confined space. Remember, when the foot is standing or resting flat on the floor it has a natural length. On pointe, however, the foot length becomes shorter as the curve of the instep increases. The shoe must therefore be as short as possible in order not to fall off at the heel.

#### Balance:

To balance in a demi-pointe shoe is much harder because there is a ridge created by the thick inner sole of the shoe, causing the ankle to roll either inwards or outwards. Wearing a demi-pointe shoe will make the muscles around the ankle work harder to control the balance, and this will strengthen them. Also, because of the tight and hard vamp, the toes are restricted in doing their natural job of helping the foot to balance. It is important to use the 3 point system discussed earlier.

3. **Rising onto demi-pointe:**

This is much harder to do because the foot has the extra

thickness of the inner sole to work against, also the instep and toes have to work hard against the vamp of the shoe. It is exactly this extra work required of the feet and calf muscles, which will make and keep them strong.

4. **Pointing the foot:**

Every time you point your foot in a demi-pointe shoe you will be exercising against the resistance of the thick sole and the vamp which will work the muscles of the foot and strengthen them.

### When should I start wearing demi-pointe shoes?

My pupils start wearing demi-pointe shoes after they have passed Grade 4, and for about one year before they begin pointe work in Pre-Elementary. You need to find out at which exam, or grade level you will be required to do pointe work. Start wearing demi-pointe shoes one year before you are required to start pointe training.

Starting to work in demi-pointe shoes from grade 5 onwards has proved very successful for my children as well as my adult dancers. It is hard to begin with, and your muscles will ache. My dancers usually only manage the first Barre exercises to start with, then they change into their “flatties”. In each class, you need to try and keep the demi-pointes on your feet longer until you can do the whole class in demi-pointe shoes. You will get used to it quite quickly and eventually will prefer it to soft ballet shoes.

I have a ballet school in Brighton where all the classes are graded not only for children, but also for the separate adult school. Over the last five years, my adults have taken all the grade exams, and, last summer, the first group of adults successfully passed their Pre-Elementary ballet exam with the British Ballet Organisation. I can honestly say that pointe work for children and adults has never been a problem, provided they look after the strength of feet and body.

It is important to continue to wear demi-pointe shoes once you have started pointe work. Wearing demi-pointe shoes throughout your dance training from grade 5 onwards will make your feet strong, and then keep them strong. Later when you start pointe work and have to replace your pointe shoes, you may use your old pointe shoes as demi-pointe shoes, by taking out part of the inner sole of the old pointe shoe.

For Barre and Centre in an exam, however, your feet would probably look better in a new demi-pointe shoe.

